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ABSTRACT

To achieve competency as consumers in the marketplace, young people need to acquire specific consumer skills. To determine the influence of such socialization agents as television, family, peers, and school on the acquisition of these skills, 607 middle and high school students in Kentucky and North Carolina completed self-administered questionnaires which focused on four variables relevant to the consumer role: brand knowledge, price accuracy, consumer affairs knowledge, and socially desirable consumer role perceptions. The results indicated that consumer skills varied according to the age, sex, and social class of the respondents. Older adolescents were found to possess these skills to a greater extent than younger adolescents. Males could more accurately price products and services, had greater consumer affairs knowledge, and were more aware of socially desirable consumer behaviors than females; but females were more aware of available brands. Upper-class adolescents scored higher in all four skills than lower-class adolescents. Peers and television were the most influential socialization agents. From their peers adolescents apparently learned about the availability of brands and about consumer matters, while from television they learned perceptions of effective consumer behavior. Parents and schools, however, contributed little to the acquisition of these skills, highlighting the need for evaluating current consumer education materials and practices at school and suggesting that some consumer education efforts could be aimed at adults. (FL)

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MASS MEDIA AND INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCES ON THE ACQUISITION OF CONSUMER COMPETENCIES

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, public-policy makers and consumer educators have shown increasing interest in consumer socialization, that is, the process by which young people acquire consumption-related skills, attitudes, and knowledge.

Public-policy makers need to understand consumer socialization in order to respond effectively to charges made by various consumer groups about the effects of marketing activities on young people. Advertising critics, for example, argue that advertising strongly influences the youth and results in undesirable socialization (e.g., nonrational, impulse-oriented buying). On the other hand, defenders of advertising practices respond by stating that advertising simply sets up the agenda for positive parent-child interaction and provides consumption-learning experiences for the child (16).

Because of the recent consumer education movement and the various public policy issues concerning the effects of promotion on young people, consumer educators have also shown a renewed interest in consumer education courses as a means of preparing children for effective interaction with the marketplace (1, 21). However, in spite of the belief by some individuals that school has always been the main learning source of young people's positive

consumer behaviors (5), the existing consumer education materials and practices have been criticized on the grounds that they teach young people very little about effective consumer behavior (3, 9, 10, 21).

This study attempts to provide an empirical base for resolving some consumer-socialization related issues and in formulating public policy. Specifically, the study examines the influence of television, family, peers, and school on the acquisition of specific consumer skills that contribute to the individual's competency and proficiency as a consumer in the marketplace.

BACKGROUND

Research on development of consumer patterns of thought and behavior is based mainly on two models of human learning: the cognitive developmental model and the social learning model. Studies utilizing the cognitive developmental approach essentially attempt to explain the formation of cognitions and behaviors as a function of age using this as a proxy variable for cognitive development (2, 21). Previous studies, for example, have examined the maturational effects on adolescent consumption-related cognitions and behaviors such as attitudes toward advertising, materialism, and purchasing habits (8, 11, 22).

The social learning model, on the other hand, explains the formation of cognitions and behaviors in terms of the person's interactions with various sources of influence or socialization agents, such as mass media, peers, and parents. "Socialization

takes place through interaction of the person with various agents in specific social settings" (6, p. 126). For example, recent research examined the relative influence of mass media, parents, peers, and school on the acquisition of specific consumer skills (8, 9, 10, 22).

This study is concerned with the development of consumption-related skills and knowledge that make an individual an effective consumer in the marketplace. Because society sets standards of consumer behavior and attempts to socialize its members to such norms through various socialization agents (e.g., media and school) (5, 7, 13), an effective consumer is viewed as the person who can meet specific demands of society. Consumer expectations maintained by society also include those which contribute to efficient utilization of economic resources for the satisfaction of the maximum number of society members. These may include (a) knowledge of available alternatives in the marketplace and ability to evaluate them with some degree of competence, (b) knowledge of one's legal rights and sources of consumer remedy and (c) socially desirable consumer-role perceptions (5, 7, 13, 17, 20).

Consumer learning in this study is viewed not merely as a cognitive psychological process of adjustment to one's environment but also as a social process. This contrasts with the view that consumer learning is merely a criterion state of knowledge. The mass media, for example, may be seen as agents of socialization rather than simply as dispensers of product information (22) because they may serve to shape consumer attitudes and behavior (8).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Self-administered questionnaires were completed by 607 students in middle schools (sixth, seventh, and eight grades) and high schools (ninth through twelfth grades) in Kentucky and North Carolina during the winter of 1975. Although logistics prevented random sampling, the mean Duncan SES for the total sample was 50.2 based on the father's occupation.

Criterion Variables

This study focused on four variables relevant to the consumer role: brand knowledge, price accuracy, consumer affairs knowledge and consumer role perceptions.

Brand knowledge refers to the extent to which the respondents correctly identified products associated with specific brands. Respondents were asked to list "the kind of product each brand stands for" in the blank beside each of 18 randomly selected brands, such as "Earth Born _____" and Avis _____." Correct answers were summed to form a 0- to 18-point index.

Price accuracy refers to the ability to price selected products and services. Respondents were asked to write how much each item cost in the blank beside each of the following 11 items: gallon of regular gasoline, airmail stamp, Big Mac, tourist-class airplane ticket from New York to Los Angeles, 3-minute phone call coast-to-coast during the weekend, Volkswagon Super Beetle, ten-speed racer bicycle, movie ticket for adults, Bic Banana pen, dentist's charges for cleaning teeth, and a year's subscription to Time magazine. A response was scored as correct if it fell within ten percent of the item's actual

price (local merchants were contacted to determine the actual price range of some items). Correct responses were summed to form a 0- to 11-point index.

Consumer affairs knowledge refers to the respondent's awareness of specific consumer legal rights and sources of consumer remedy. Students were asked to respond to six "True-False-Don't Know" items. To detect any response set bias, half of the items required "false" answers to be correct while the other three required "true" answers. A typical item was "Milk sold at the store must show the last day it can be sold." Correct responses were summed to form a 0- to 6-point index.

Because role perceptions include formalized expectations associated with the given social role (18), our consumer role perceptions variable refers to the accuracy of "the individual's cognitions and perceptions of what a (consumer) role consists of in terms of functions, obligations, position, and rights involved in role description" (18, p. 334). Respondents were asked whether they agreed, disagreed or didn't know if a good consumer does ten different things such as "shops around before buying anything that costs a lot of money" and "tries not to waste energy." Five of the ten items were stated so that an "agree" response would correspond to what are generally perceived as positive consumer behaviors and cognitions. A "disagree" response to the other five items would correspond to desirable behaviors or cognitions. Because of prior hypotheses of the direction of correct responses, answers were scored on a 3-point scale based on the intensity of the respondent's judgement (19). Answers were summed to form a 10- to 30-point index.

Independent Variables

Because socialization occurs during the interaction of the learner with the socialization agents (6), the frequency of adolescent interaction with four agents (parents, media, peers, and school) was measured.

Intrafamily communication about consumption refers to the extent to which the adolescent interacts with his/her parents about consumption matters. Of the nine items used to measure the adolescent's frequency of interaction with parents, factor analysis revealed five with a factor loading of .50 or greater focusing on communication from the adolescent to the parent. A typical item designed to measure adolescent-parent communication about consumption was "I tell my parents what I think about things they buy for themselves." The remaining four items loaded significantly (.50 or greater) on a second factor focusing on communication from parent to adolescent. A typical item designed to measure parent-adolescent communication about consumption was "My parents tell me why they buy something before they buy it." Responses to intrafamily communication items were measured on a 5-point "very often-never" scale, and variable scores were obtained by summing across items on each variable.

In line with previous research (6), mass media interaction was assessed by the extent to which adolescents viewed the following on television: news, cartoons, sports, movies, talk shows, and police and adventure shows. Responses to 5-point "very often-never" scales were summed across the six items to form the television viewing variable.

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which they interact with friends about consumption matters. The peer communication about consumption variable was constructed by summing "very often-never" responses (measured on a 5-point scale) across five items which loaded significantly on the hypothesized factor. A typical item for this scale was "I learn from friends what to look for in buying things."

The extent of adolescents' interaction with school about consumption matters was defined in terms of the total number of credit units they had completed in consumer education, home economics, economics, environmental science and guidance (job education) classes. Consumer-related courses was defined as the total credit units completed in these classes.

Finally, social class was determined by father's occupation, using Duncan's socioeconomic scale (4).

RESULTS

Age Differences on Dependent Consumer Skills

The first consideration in this study was age differences on the four consumer skills for younger (sixth through eighth grade) vs. older (ninth through twelfth grade) adolescents. To the extent to which younger adolescents were at the formal operations stage of cognitive development--ages 11 through 14 (15)--the researchers expected them to be still developing their consumer skills. Thus, it was expected that older adolescents would have acquired the four consumer skills to a significantly greater extent than younger adolescents.

The data in Table I support this. Older adolescents scored significantly higher on the brand knowledge, price accuracy, consumer affairs knowledge and role perception measures than did their younger counterparts.

Sex and Socioeconomic Differences

Another concern was the effects of social structural factors (e.g., sex and socioeconomic characteristics) that locate the young person in his consumer environment since social factors may have a direct impact on consumer learning. For example, blue-collar families appear to emphasize different buying criteria in purchasing their children's clothes than do white-collar families (12). Social structural factors may also have an indirect effect on consumer learning, for example, by affecting socialization processes as a function of sex and socioeconomic characteristics.

Table II shows mean values of dependent and adolescent-agent interaction variables for male vs. female adolescents. Male adolescents appear to possess (a) a greater ability to accurately price products/services in the marketplace, (b) greater awareness of consumer affairs and (c) a greater awareness of positive consumer role expectations than female adolescents. On the other hand, female adolescents are more aware of available brands in the marketplace. On the adolescent's interaction with various socialization agents, significant sex differences emerged only for the adolescent-parent communication measure, suggesting that female adolescents talk with their parents about consumption matters more frequently than males (Table II).

TABLE I

MEANS OF DEPENDENT CONSUMER SKILLS MEASURES

FOR YOUNGER VS. OLDER ADOLESCENTS

Consumer Skills	Younger Adolescents	Older Adolescents
	(N = 205)	(N = 402)
Brand Knowledge[a]	16.48	17.27
Price Accuracy[a]	4.11	4.92
Consumer Affairs Knowledge[a]	4.28	4.94
Consumer Role Perceptions[a]	25.29	26.51

[a]Means are significantly different from each other at .05 level (one tailed test using normal approximation to sampling distribution).

Table III shows the means of dependent and adolescent-agent interaction variables for lower, middle, and upper-class adolescents. A significant positive relationship appears between the adolescent's social class and the extent to which he/she (a) is aware of available brands in the marketplace, (b) can accurately price products and services, (c) knows about consumer rights and recourse and (d) is aware of socially desirable consumer role expectations. On the adolescent's interaction with the various socialization agents, the data in Table III show significant differences only for communication with peers. Upper-class adolescents interacted with peers about consumption matters more frequently than lower-class adolescents.

Influence of television, family, peers, and school

The final consideration in this study was the influence of four specific sources of consumer information (agents). Adolescent interaction with the various sources of consumer learning was expected to be positively associated with the learning of various skills.

Table IV shows relationships among each of the consumer skills and the independent variables. The relationships are expressed in terms of partial correlations--the correlation between the dependent consumer skill and each of the independent variables with the effects of other explanatory factors removed.

TABLE II

MEANS OF DEPENDENT CONSUMER SKILLS AND SOCIALIZATION MEASURES FOR MALE VS. FEMALE ADOLESCENTS

	Male Adolescents	Female Adolescents
	(N = 344)	(N = 263)
Consumer Skills		
Brand Knowledge[a]	16.93	17.10
Price Accuracy[a]	4.80	4.46
Consumer Affairs Knowledge[a]	4.81	4.61
Consumer Role Perceptions[a]	26.18	25.99
Socialization Processes		
Intrafamily Communication About Consumption		
Adolescent-Parent Communication[a]	11.75	12.34
Parent-Adolescent Communication	13.29	13.31
Peer Communication About Consumption	17.67	17.67
Television Viewing	21.70	21.16
Consumer-Related Courses	2.88	3.08

[a]Means are significantly different from each other at .05 level (two-tailed test using normal approximation to sampling distribution).

TABLE III

MEANS OF DEPENDENT CONSUMER SKILLS AND SOCIALIZATION MEASURES BY SOCIAL CLASS

	Lower Class	Middle Class	Upper Class
	(N=140)	(N=290)	(N=177)
Consumer Skills			
Brand Knowledge[a]	16.67	16.93	17.38
Price Accuracy[a]	4.38	4.55	5.03
Consumer Affairs Knowledge[a]	4.50	4.60	5.09
Consumer Role Perceptions[a]	25.83	25.92	26.61
Socialization Processes			
Television Viewing	21.72	21.57	21.09
Intrafamily Communication About Consumption			
Adolescent-Parent Communication	11.77	11.90	12.36
Parent-Adolescent Communication	13.46	13.06	13.58
Peer Communication About Consumption[a]	17.22	17.56	18.21
Consumer-Related Courses	3.08	3.06	2.91

[a]Means are significantly different at .05 level using F-test.

TABLE IV

PARTIAL CORRELATIONS AMONG CONSUMER SKILLS

AND EXPLANATORY VARIABLES

	Brand Knowledge	Price Accuracy	Role Perceptions	Consumer Affairs
Socialization Processes				
Television Viewing	.07	-.05	.09*	.04
Family Communication About Consumption				
Adolescent-Parent	.01	.05	-.02	.00
Parent-Adolescent	.06	.02	.05	.07
Peer Communication About Consumption	.18***	.13***	.06	.08*
Consumer-Related Courses	-.05	-.06	-.06	-.05
Maturational Development	.15***	.25***	.09*	.19***
Social Structural Variables				
Sex	.06	-.10**	.02	-.08*
Social Class	.11**	.11**	.09*	.17***

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Television. Television exposure correlated significantly only with the consumer role perceptions ($r = .09$, $p < .01$). Thus, adolescents appear to learn socially desirable consumer behaviors and cognitions from this medium.

Family. The adolescent's interaction with parents about consumption matters did not significantly correlate with any of the four consumer skills. Communication from parent to adolescent was only weakly correlated with the child's consumer affairs knowledge ($r = .07$, $p < .10$).

Peers. Peers are apparently the most significant influence on the four consumer skills. Interaction with peers is positively linked with the adolescent's awareness of brands in the marketplace ($r = .18$, $p < .001$), accuracy of the prices of specific goods and services ($r = .13$, $p < .001$), and greater consumer affairs knowledge ($r = .08$, $p < .05$). Unfortunately, the data did not allow us to answer questions about the processes of such learning, such as whether younger adolescents learn consumer skills from older adolescents.

School. The adolescent's formal consumer education at school did not correlate significantly with any of the dependent consumer skill measures in this study. Apparently, children learn very little at school about consumption matters and socially desirable consumer behaviors.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This study of adolescent consumer socialization examined the acquisition of four consumer skills believed to contribute to the individual's competency as a consumer in the marketplace: brand knowledge, price accuracy, consumer affairs knowledge, and socially desirable consumer role perceptions. These skills varied by age, sex and social class of the adolescent respondents. Specifically, older adolescents were found to possess these skills to a significantly greater extent than younger adolescents. Male adolescents could more accurately price products and services in the marketplace, had greater consumer affairs knowledge, and were more aware of socially desirable consumer behaviors and cognitions than female adolescents, while female adolescents were more aware of available brands of products.

Upper-class adolescents scored higher on the measures of these four skills than lower-class adolescents. These findings support the contention that adolescents from low-income homes have less experience with spending and are less aware of their consumer environment than adolescents from upper-income homes who have more opportunities for consumption (21).

On the influence of television, family, peers, and school on the acquisition of these consumer skills, the findings suggest peers and television are the most significant sources of consumer information. Adolescents appear to learn from their peers about the availability of brands and their attributes and about consumer matters. They learn perceptions of effective consumer behavior from television, but parents and school apparently

contribute little to the acquisition of such skills. These findings are consistent with those of previous research on the effectiveness of parent consumer training and formal consumer education (3, 9, 10, 21).

These findings highlight the need for evaluating current consumer education materials and practices at school and possibly show the target groups of students who need more consumer training. Consumer educators in middle and high schools could perhaps focus more effort on lower-class adolescents and on female adolescents since they appear to lag the upper-class and male adolescents in learning certain consumer skills.

While adolescent interaction with parents about consumption matters is not rare, young people apparently learn very little about effective consumer behavior from their parents. This may be due to a lack of consumer knowledge on the part of the adults or a lack of motivation to teach children consumer skills. Therefore, some consumer education efforts could also be aimed at adults.

Finally television and peers apparently serve as better consumer socialization agents than family and school, which up to now have been presumed to be the important sources of consumer information for children (5, 14).

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